

FOUR-POINT-SEVEN

By WALTER WOOD

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Four-Point-Seven was attached to an expedition operating against a strongly entrenched body of Boxers. An admiral commanded, and it was his purpose to reach and destroy the enemy before they could muster in greater force.

"Four-Point-Seven," said Jock to a comrade at the end of the first march, "is a useful creature, but a big, unwillin' lump. What I want to know is why Four-Point-Seven? Why not maxims or pompons or mountain guns—something you can bring with you if you want 'em; eh, Harry?"

"Bring 'em away from beathen Chinese," exclaimed the comrade. "Never! There's no turnin' back on this journey."

"I've been in China before," said Jock, "and I know the breed. We've only a handful after all, and if we're overpowered?"

For five days the expedition forced its way into the land of the enemy, sometimes meeting and beating him and sometimes advancing unopposed. The commanding officer then began to see that success was not to follow him and gave the word for a return to the place from which they had started. By this time a number of the officers and men had been killed, disease was breaking out, and the number of the sick and wounded grew.

Not a shot had been fired by Four-Point-Seven, and her weakened crew dragged disappointedly at the heavy bulk. The retreat was kept up for two full days; then it was known that a horde of Imperial troops was following to cut off stragglers. It's more a case of cut up than cut off if they get us," said Jock, by way of grim jest. "Will the admiral never tell us to leave her into the nearest hole?"

But there was no need for a command like that. One of the wheels of the carriage sank deep into a bed of mud, and the most furious efforts of the crew could not get it out.

Lieutenant Reeder was among the wounded. He had been shot through both ankles and could not walk. Jock and Harry were among the sick and could scarcely crawl. They watched with languid interest while the admiral's order that the gun should be destroyed and the ammunition buried was given. At the same time the sick and wounded were placed on the ground near Four-Point-Seven.

Reeder watched earnestly. He understood before the admiral came up to him to explain.

"I've got to leave you," said the admiral. "God knows how I feel about it, but it's the only way."

"I understand that, sir," said Reeder. "I know it will take you all your time to get away with those who are sound, let alone the cripples and the sick. But leave us the gun, sir, and a shell."

"Be it so," said the admiral, "and goodbye."

"Goodbye, sir," answered Reeder. He raised himself a little as he spoke, but, exhausted with the effort, he sank back.

It seemed long before the lieutenant heard a sound of any sort. Then he raised his head and looked sharply across the country before him, for he heard the sound of distant marching. But nothing met his gaze. His head sank back.

Jock and Harry heard the noise also. "Is it to be a case of tryin' to run for it after all?" asked Harry, "or squintin' 'ere till they come on?"

"Wait for 'em," said Jock grimly. "But we shan't wait long. I'll soon be over when they see us, and they can't miss. They're walkin' straight on top of us."

"I've told you, men," said Reeder sternly, whose sharp ears had caught the sounds, "that I won't have you either talking or moving. Put your rifles down and shut your mouths. If this move fails then blaze away as hard as you please, only, in mercy's sake, give me a shot first and keep a couple for yourselves. That'll be better shift than ever you'll get from devils like these."

They raised their heads a little, but even yet did not see what the lieutenant's purpose was.

"Jock," said Reeder, after a pause. "Sir," answered the seaman.

"Can you climb on to your pine for two minutes? Help's coming. I'm sure of that. The admiral was pretty certain or he wouldn't have gone and left us here. Can you lend a hand? You're about the only one left among us that can stand."

Jock forced himself into a sitting position. Without saying a word he struggled to his feet, stood on them for a full second and sank to the ground. He gave a short, hard laugh. "You've seen that exhibition, sir. What do you think?"

"Why," answered Reeder stotily, "I think you can, my lad. Jock, you're got to."

"Put it as an order, sir," said Jock, with a strange light in his eyes. "Can you stand an' walk yourself at all?"

"I can crawl a bit," said the lieutenant.

"So can I," said a feeble voice near him.

"Why, Harry," said Reeder, "I thought you were—"

"No did I, sir, but I'm not—not yet. Can you do as Jock says, sir—make it an order, like? Give us the word to fall in, sir—rap it out well. Then we can't help it. Force of habit'll see us through."

"Fall in!" said Reeder in a loud, firm voice.

Jock and Harry struggled to their feet. They tottered, but, supporting each other, they did not succumb.

"Keep it up, sir," said Harry. "I feel the strength comin' back to my bones as if I'd had a nip of grog."

"Lug me up to the gun," ordered Reeder.

The men bent down and took an arm each. They helped but feebly, yet the lieutenant got over the ground toward the weapon. Four-Point-Seven had stopped sinking and was now lying forlornly on one side with the muzzle and the breech near the ground, so near that men could load her while on their knees. To any one approaching over the primitive road the gun and the sick and wounded were alike invisible a thousand yards away.

"Prop me up here against this stone," continued the lieutenant, "and be smart about it, my lads." He smiled as he gave the order.

"That's the ticket, sir," exclaimed Harry, with a grin. "It's as good as a pantyline."

"It makes a first rate chair, sir—the stone for a back an' the soft earth for a seat," commented Jock when they had helped the lieutenant to a sitting posture. "If you'd like an armchair I can get you a couple of stones to put your elbows on."

"No, thank you; I want my elbows free," answered the lieutenant. "Give her a bit of a lift to port, if you can. Just a touch up with that handspike. There, that's enough. Now she has an uninterrupted view from her own eye of the roadway. Now, if all's tight, make yourselves scarce in the ditch here."

Jock and Harry, exhausted with their labors, did as they were ordered. The lieutenant crawled by his stone support and stretched himself upon his back near the gun, the lanyard of which he held.

"If they do come past us," he murmured, "we shall be ready to receive 'em. Now, old girl, if you never distinguished yourself before, see that you do it now. Let me see—that dismal looking tree's about 1,000 yards away. The shell will catch the head of 'em and do mischief with the body and tail unless I'm a Dutchman. Are they really here? They are coming in a lee line for us."

He raised himself on his elbow and looked. The column came on, solid, resistless, it seemed, straight for the spot where Four-Point-Seven and the remnant of her crew were hidden. It was like a wall advancing. Banners were waving, and the men were crying excitedly.

Those who were first among them kept stopping to examine the road, in which the footmarks of the retreating force were clearly seen. They came on like a huge pack of hounds keen on the scent and having the quarry almost visible.

The mass came nearer. Reeder saw that the entire column was in the direct line of fire of Four-Point-Seven, that a shot or shell must bore a lane down the very middle of the mass and that a bursting shell must devastate the forces. He felt that on his face and pulled the lanyard.

There were a crash and a hiss from Four-Point-Seven. At the same instant there were appalling cries and another crash, the sound of the bursting shell.

Reeder, Jock and every sailor who could move rose up to mark what Four-Point-Seven had done.

"They run, they run!" cried Reeder. "It's doubled 'em up! They didn't expect it, and they're demoralized."

"But we can't," Jock answered. "There's no more ammunition. Besides, look at the gun."

The lieutenant looked and saw that Four-Point-Seven had been driven by the recoil deep into the earth.

"Not all the men here, sir, could get her out of that," added Jock, "even if they could stand on their legs. But what is that?"

Reeder turned slowly and looked to the rear. He saw men—men with white hats and helmets hurrying over the ground. "They're our own people!" he exclaimed. "It's our own people reinforced and coming back for us. Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" he cried, waving his hand. The effort was too much for him and he fainted.

When he came round he saw that a marine artillery officer from his own ship was bending over him, offering him liquid from his water bottle.

"You murdering young man," said the gunner in deep admiration. "They'll have to call you the 'plow' in future. Why, you pretty well wiped a regiment out with that shot."

"Good old Four-Point-Seven," said Reeder. "I always knew she'd do us well. She'll be a credit to us all for long enough yet if we can only get her out of the mud."

"You are wrong there," said the gunner. "She'll talk no more. She can't possibly be got away from here, so as soon as we're all clear of this spot she'll be blown up. Here comes the stretcher chaps for you—you have the honor to be the last to go."

A couple of marines got the lieutenant upon a stretcher and marched off with him. When they were some hundred yards away they halted. Reeder turned and looked. Jock, from a neighboring stretcher, looked too.

They saw a cloud of smoke in which were dark fragments. Then they heard the crash of an explosion. A very small fragment of steel fell near the lieutenant's right hand. He picked it up. "A bit of a gun," he muttered. "I'll keep it till the end of my days to remind me of what saved my life. Good old Four-Point-Seven!"

Jock sighed regretfully. "I always said the gun was all right if you could only get the other side to walk up an' give her a chance. They did walk up, sir."

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